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RHMFIUU/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: RISING CRIME IN BRUSSELS UNDERLINES BELGIUM,S
POLITICAL & COMMUNITY DIVIDE

¶1. (U) Summary. Two violent incidents in Brussels over the weekend of January 29-31 have led to increased political tension between Flemish and francophones on how to govern the Brussels-Capital Region. Violent acts such as car fires in the Anderlecht Commune and a bank robbery in the northern Brussels commune of Laeken, paired with an increased number of inexpensive firearms have spurred differing opinions from both linguistic communities on how to best secure the capital city. While Flemish politicians push for a single police zone for the 19 Brussels communes, the Francophone Community argues that they have the final say in Brussels and remain unconvinced that merging the police zones will solve the problem. Minister of Justice Stefaan de Clerck has proposed a conference to try to find an agreement between the two communities. End summary.

¶2. (U) After the Anderlecht-Cercle soccer match on Friday, January 29 and again on Saturday evening, local youth set fire to several vehicles, causing unrest in the Anderlecht Commune of Brussels. Although the Anderlecht Commune is known to be one of the more crime-ridden areas of Brussels, the Mayor of Anderlecht stated that violence is not confined to Anderlecht.

¶3. (U) The bigger story, however, is the shoot-out that ensued Saturday afternoon after several young men robbed a Western Union Bank in the Laeken Commune of Brussels. After being chased, one of the men wounded a policeman in the leg with a Kalishnikov, a gun that Brussels police are encountering with increasing frequency and that can reportedly be purchased for as little as 50 euros (approximately 70 USD) on the black market in Brussels. After fleeing into an apartment building, the police apprehended all 30 people in the complex, arrested the three young men responsible, and seized several weapons that were hidden in the basement of the building.

¶4. (U) After the mayor of Brussels, Freddy Thielemans, played down the shooting incident, calling it a "petty crime," the Flemish press began actively calling for police reform in the Brussels-Capital Region. The region, which is composed of 19 communes, has six police districts. As a matter of "national" pride for the city they consider their capital, Flemish-speakers, mostly outside Brussels, seek political reform to merge the six districts into one. Since Brussels is part of the Francophone Community, French-speakers feel there is no need for the Flemish, and Flanders, to intervene. Meanwhile, the francophones have not provided a solution, stating that while reform is necessary, they do not share the opinion that merging the six zones will resolve the issue. This is becoming yet another issue that divides Belgians along linguistic community lines. Flemish politicians are calling for tougher policing to produce

immediate results, while francophones prefer to discuss causes and long-term problems.

¶5. (U) Some political leaders and the police unions have called for faster trials for minor crimes and stronger police forces. The head of the Brussels judiciary quickly made a public statement that prosecutors and judges would not be able to step up the pace of trials or deal with more petty crime for at least nine months due to lack of manpower and slow judicial reform in Belgium. The same can be said for the ill-coordinated and under-staffed police forces of Brussels. This week, several police unions have gone on strike in Brussels to protest the situation. The new approach to crime being hyped by the Minister of Interior, Annemie Turtelboom, and others is "zero tolerance." Turtelboom, a Flemish politician, agrees that a single police district in Brussels is a good idea, but stated that she would not impose the unification because that would only further irritate francophones. Minister of Justice Stefaan de Clerck proposed a conference to discuss the security of Brussels during which both linguistic groups would ideally agree upon a solution.

GUTMAN

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